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Beauty And The Beast at the Mickery

by Bruce Murphy

Beauty And The Beast was presented at Amsterdam's Mickery Theatre from August 29 through September 26, 1981. It was conceived and designed by long-time Mickery producer Ritsaert ten Cate and directed by English director Pip Simmons. John Schneider, Artistic Director of Theatre X of Milwaukee, collaborated with Simmons on the primarily English-language text.

The audience is seated behind an iron grill some nine feet above a vast, box-like staging area. On stage, below Amsterdam flags hung à la Nazi rallies, are rows of chairs and a podium with a microphone. The floor is littered with cigarette butts and political posters. A security guard sits off in a corner, his back to the audience, watching television.

A white-uniformed cleaning crew enters and begins folding chairs with choreographed, assembly-line precision. Muzak plays, punctuated by the rhythmic clap of the chairs. The flags magically fall into the outstretched hands of workers, who seem to accept this as routine. Other crew members clean the floor with industrial vacuum cleaners. One worker repeats an apparent domestic complaint: "She's always stroking me."

The iron grill is raised away as a T.V. swings down like a pendulum to audience level. The announcer talks reassuringly about the value of T.V. for children. If parents control what their children see or watch with them, television has a beneficial effect. Below, actors pedal tricycles across the stage. A window opens on the back wall, where a woman plays with a makeup-and-hair-styling kit and a human-sized doll's head.

A second window opens on a woman reading from the "Beauty And The Beast" fairytale. "Please, don't look at me . . . I'm so ugly," says the beast, and Beauty realizes she cannot let it die.

A toy salesman and his assistant are raised shakily on a hydraulic lift to audience level. Standing before shelves of toys, the sweating salesman rhapsodizes about toys you can trust, stressing that children learn so much about the world during their first 18 months. The salesman offers secretary and housekeeping kits for girls, or a transparent doll with detachable internal organs of poisonous hues. For boys there are submachine guns or B52 bombers.

The salesmen are lowered as a quartet in black evening wear sing the first movement of Faure's *Requiem*. Midway through the piece, dry ice smoke blankets the stage waist deep. A woman in general's costume appears and unbuttons the coat to bare her breasts, against which she presses a toy airplane. A male general takes the toy from her and, much like a little boy, sails it through the clouds. There is a toy-sized nuclear explosion and mushroom cloud. Miniature Christmas trees appear within the smoke and burst into flame.

Three music stands are set at center stage and the quartet returns. An enormous transparent curtain is drawn diagonally from the left front to the right rear across stage. Projected images of Dutch Christmas celebrations appear only as white paint is sprayed on the curtain by an actor. The images appear and melt away, replaced by other images, as a pianist plays and sings "Come Away Melinda," a haunting war-protest song of 1960s vintage.

Quartet members now portray a child-woman, her mother, uncle and grandfather, based on excerpts of R. D. Laing's interviews with schizophrenics. The mother grieves that her daughter never appreciated the expensive dresses she bought her, while the

uncle complains that his niece was always stroking him. Bluntly, the daughter says she cannot love them and walks away. After repetition of their complaints, the uncle and mother descend into a lighted hole in the stage. The roof of a fall-out shelter closes over them. As the transparent curtain is pulled away, more fall-out shelters appear with T.V. antennae poking out.

A window on the back wall opens to reveal the daughter, who speaks intensely. "I'm afraid to think . . . it screws me up . . . I don't know what to think . . . or feel."

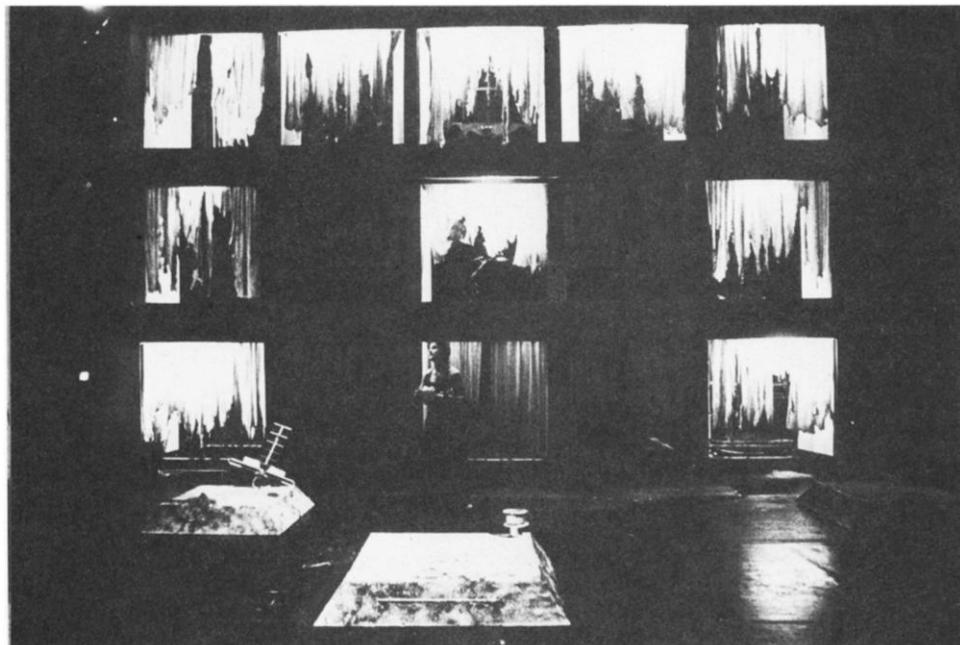
On stage, the grandfather, still standing, removes his white hair and beard. He talks sadly of his love for his granddaughter. He built his life around her, loved her, yet as she got sick, they grew estranged. Nonetheless, he continues as before and says nothing about it to anyone. He walks down into a fall-out shelter as "Come Away Melinda" ends.

A T.V. swings down. It is a commercial for fall-out shelters and firearms for fall-out shelters, all mail order specials. Buyers receive a bonus subscription to *Survive* magazine. Meanwhile, on the back wall, three rows of 15 windows open, lowering charred curtains that blow lightly. There is the sound of wind chimes and a weather report in Dutch, reporting movement of radiation.

The daughter climbs down from her window and finds a ukulele. Playing it, she sings "Cruise Missiles," a Dutch rock group's recent song with English lyrics. "We're sitting on those cruise missiles . . . not five miles away." Her tone becomes increasingly disgusted.

A huge, double-barreled shotgun is extended from a fall-out shelter and fires, a gut-walloping explosion.

The daughter throws down her ukulele and cracks it. She begins to paint graffiti on the wall: "WE WILL CONTINUE." (Dutch squatters painted this on buildings from which they were ultimately ejected to make way for a subway to the suburbs.)



The daughter sings "Cruise Missiles" in front of windows with charred curtains.

From the curtained windows, four actors enter, each dressed as "Black Pete." (Black Pete is the Moorish assistant to Santa Claus who, in Dutch Christmas mythology, writes down each good and bad act of children.) They watch the daughter, scribble in their notebooks, and exit. She writes more graffiti. "DON'T LEAVE ME ALONE."

Huge double doors open the back wall and Santa Claus and Black Pete enter on a madly revolving mechanical crane, as snow begins to fall. They carry sacks of gifts and birch sticks. The crane lowers them to drop gifts on each fall-out shelter and raises them to audience level. Santa Claus aggressively leads the audience in singing a traditional Dutch carol. The last line translates to "Our hearts are beating . . . who gets the cake, and who gets the stick?"

Santa Claus lectures the audience with excerpts from speeches by Margaret Thatcher and other British officials during the recent youth riots. "I blame the parents . . . if parents can't take care of their kids, we will."

Black Pete shakes his fist at the daughter as the crane rolls him and Santa back through the double doors. The daughter sits in the snow, opening gifts. Each gift turns out to be a brick. The music is ominous. She begins to build a wall, perhaps a home of sorts.

The double doors open to reveal folding chairs set up again, this time faced away from the audience. Santa Claus and several Black Petes watch a televised soccer match. The Black Petes change into Santa Claus suits. All actors take up rattan shields and truncheons similar to those used by Amsterdam's riot squad. The head man tries to explain riot tactics to his squad but has to turn off the T.V. to get their attention. "The job of the police is to restrain these kids, for the good of the community. If unusual tactics are necessary, then unusual tactics will be used."

As the Santa Claus police advance, two of their members perform a tap dance. The iron grill is lowered before the audience. The police tramp through the daughter's brick wall and destroy it. They climb to audience level, holding their shields between the audience and the daughter.

The recorded sound of Amsterdam's squatter riots of 1975 is played. (At that riot squatters threw bricks at police. Before the riot was put down, two police inexplicably dressed as Santa and Black Pete stood on a building overlooking the scene.)

The daughter smashes bricks in half and begins throwing them at the police. An order is given and a high-pressure hose is trained on the daughter. She balls up her body for protection.

The order to withdraw is given. As the police exit, one cop speaks in the voice of the mother, again complaining about her daughter. The daughter, drenched and defeated, plaintively sings the Dutch carol, repeating its question: "Who gets the cake, and who gets the stick?"

Rain begins to fall on her. The grandfather enters and holds an umbrella over her. "Do you remember the fairytales I used to tell," he asks. She says she remembers the one in which Beauty learned to love the beast.

They exit. Rain falls. Uniformed workers enter and sweep away the stage's debris, as the pianist-singer refrains "Come Away Melinda."

Bruce Murphy writes about the arts for Milwaukee Magazine, The Milwaukee Journal, Stage Bill, and other publications.